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OSS Vets: Gunpowder and an Elephant on the Burma Road

By Wendy Law-Yone

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Memories were rampant, cussing was contagious. "Damn," said Carl Eifler, "I haven't used profanity in years, but now that I get near this group the old brain pattern is kicking off and I'm swearing away."

Veterans of Detachment 101 of the Office of Strategic Services (precursor of the CIA) retreated to the Sheraton-Carlton Saturday night to recall the dear dead days of WWII when women were gals, intelligence-gathering was not yet a dirty word and war meant patriotism.

"This outfit had more fun than any other I know of," said "Wilkie" Wilkinson, one of the earliest recruits in this unit of guerrilla fighters.

Veteran Norm Larum told about shooting an elephant — not in the conscience-stricken tones of George Orwell, but with sheepish chuckles over the magnitude of both victim and weapon. This was a crazed bull elephant that had sent half the population of a village up into the trees, and Larum killed him dead (as the insect-spray ads say) with a bazooka. ("I'd always wondered what a bazooka shell would do to an elephant.")

So went the stories: Full of ack-ack and ammo ("I fired back a snooper dooper" . . . "It sounded like the Fourth of July on Battery Park. . .") until the Crystal Room of the Sheraton-Carlton fairly reeked of gunpowder.

"Now, gunpowder," said Bill Cummings, a 101 veteran whose family had been agricultural missionaries in Burma, "was made by the Kachins from distilled urine. In the rainy season, they would urinate through the bamboo floor of their houses. Come the dry season, they'd scoop up the deposits and let the stuff leach down through a bamboo-leaf filter until it turned into sodium nitrate. Together with pounded-up charcoal, this made the black powder they used in their old muskets."

The Kachins were the partisan tribesmen of Northern Burma trained by 101 to drive the Japanese to distraction. These tribesmen were fierce and loyal fighters, and devisers of a peculiar method of counting enemy heads: Snipping off the ears and later dividing them by two.

It was early 1942, and the news from the CBI (China-Burma-India) Theater was bad. The Japanese had

penetrated Burma from the south, and had cut off the Burma Road, the main ground route and supply line for the allied war effort in China. "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell had taken "a hell of a beating," and now the object was to prepare for the reopening of the Burma Road.

To do this, a special unit was needed, a group of parachutists, demolitionists, radio officers and other daredevils who would have to operate behind enemy lines in what Britain's Gen. William Slim called "some of the world's worst country, breeding the world's worst diseases, and having for half the year at least the world's worst climate." Gen. "Wild Bill" Donovan, head of OSS, gave the order to form the clandestine unit, and the rest is 101 history. It was history that culminated in the recapture of Burma, which Churchill once likened to "munching a porcupine, quill by quill."

The last commanding officer of 101, Gen. "Ray" Peers, was making the rounds on Saturday in high spirits. He had been autographing (and selling like hot rice cakes) his latest book, "The My Lai Inquiry"—pleased, he said, very pleased by the reviews so far. Peers was not the only literary figure at the reunion. Dick Dunlop, another Burma veteran, had just come out with a new account of 101 history, "Behind Japanese Lines," and also was doing a brisk trade.

Preserving history, in one form or another, appears to be a popular pastime for the veterans, who came mostly from California. Some are real-estate agents, one is a silversmith, another is studying Medieval Welsh.

There was even a psychiatrist from Aberdeen, Scotland Bill Brough. He was a 101 medic who had been a conscientious objector until one day, in what was "one whale of a firefight" with a Japanese patrol, a wounded Kachin ranger he was trying to rescue was shot off his back. That was the straw that broke the pacifist's back. Brough took up a rifle and turned out, said Peers, to be "one of the best soldiers to fight that war."

Saturday night's banquet of some 200 people included veterans and their families, along with many retirees from the CIA sporting "George Bush for President" buttons. However, "we're really a mixed crowd politically," said one. "Some of these people are Connally supporters. Go ask Anna Chennault, for example."

But Republican Anna Chennault, widow of Flying Tigers commander Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault, and guest speaker for the evening, had other things to talk about.

Covering an expanse of issues ranging from her romance with Gen. Chennault to criticism of Fidel Castro's recent visit to the United States, Chennault went on to defend the Vietnam war ("It was not wrong that we supported the war in Southeast Asia; the only thing wrong was that we allowed it to get into political football") to denounce normalization of relations with China as "a marriage of convenience" and to regret the loss of America's confidence ("It's still the best country in the world; let us not apologize for America").

At one point in her speech, Chennault asked, rhetorically, "Where are all the heroes now?"

The heroes were there in abundance, if a little fatigued from two days of reuniting and reminiscing. Still, once a hero always a hero.

"Like this," said Carl Eifler, 101's original commanding officer, as he pulled out his ID-card folder and flashed a citation: "International Order: Old Bastards."

"Never runs out?" asked the wife of an old-war buddy, sweetly.